

Naihanchi - an Introduction to Karate Clinch Fighting

By Daniel Marino

PREFACE

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in the karate world in what in Japanese is called “bunkai” (literally meaning ‘analysis’ or ‘disassembly’). Bunkai is the term commonly used to refer to the application of the movements found in traditional kata (or hyung for my fellow Korean stylists). There are more and more people who are no longer satisfied with approaching kata as nothing more than a gymnastic exercise with little direct connection to any kind of realistic combat. This ‘new’ (not really new but we will get to that) style of karate is often referred to as the Practical Karate Movement.

One of the biggest misconceptions about karate is that it is purely a striking art; in reality grappling has always been a part of karate. When I was growing up, there was grappling in my karate training, but it was never something we spent much time on. It was a part of the static drills that made up my organizations syllabus, but the techniques never found their way into our more active sparring practice. Without pressure-testing these skills against a resisting opponent, I never developed any kind of useful grappling ability. They were something that I had to perform against a compliant partner when testing for a new rank and that was it. This is an experience that I know many of my fellow karate practitioners shared in the foundational years of their training.

Today, this shortfalling has never been more evident. The rise of a new combat sport known as Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has shown how vital it is that a practitioner have both striking and grappling skills. In fact, without supplemental grappling skills, even the most highly skilled striker seems to be easily handled by a trained grappler that has an understanding of how to close the gap and grab ahold of the striker effectively putting them in a position where their methods are least effective. This is where MMA has been a good influence on the martial arts world at large. It has shown conclusively that effective fighters need to be well-rounded in their skillset. This is something that the old karate masters knew all along.

1 - Historical Precedence

“The karate that has been introduced to Tokyo is actually just a part of the whole. The fact that those who have learnt karate there feel it only consists of kicks and punches, and that throws and locks are only to be found in Judo and Jujutsu, can only be put down to a lack of understanding... Those who are thinking of the future of karate should have an open mind and strive to study the complete art.”

~ Kenwa Mabuni

Karate has changed a lot from its pre-modern roots up to the modern day. One has only to pick up a karate book from the early 1900s to see that the old masters that pioneered our art had short, shallow stances and hardly ever kicked above the waist. In the last hundred years or so, karate has become highly developed as an athletic pursuit. You can see this in the prevalence of difficult kicking techniques, dynamic kata performances, and international 'point fighting' leagues. Some go so far as to say that the old karate masters really weren't that good compared to modern day practitioners and, from a purely athletic perspective, I would say that this is hard to argue with.

Though, what many people miss is that the karate of the old masters was something very different in both objective and approach. If one of these men were to attend a modern karate competition my suspicion is that they would hardly recognize what was being done there as the same art as their own. Their karate was not for sport nor for demonstration. It was concerned with defense against criminal violence; short, close range, violent encounters where the primary goal was to escape unharmed.

"Karate is not intended to be used against a single adversary. It is a method of using the hands and feet to avoid injury should one, by chance, be confronted by a villain or ruffian."

~ Anko Itosu

Modern point fighting rules are highly restrictive. In most leagues, the fighting is not continuous. Competitors will engage until the judges see a point scored. They are then separated until a call can be made before going at it again. Whole target areas are off limits, like no strikes below the belt or to the back. Full power contact is often illegal, making it difficult to distinguish between a glancing blow and an effective strike to a vital target. Grabbing, clinching, throws and submissions are all often illegal. You are guaranteed, in all point fighting competitions I have witnessed, to only be facing a single opponent. None of this in any way resembles criminal violence and it is no surprise that the old masters stated clearly that karate was not developed for one on one consensual combat.

The result is that point fighting develops skills for a highly specific kind of engagement and often that skill set does not bridge the gap to the chaotic nature of a criminal attack. A point fighter often does not need grappling skills because in competition his opponent is not allowed to grab him. The old masters did not have this luxury in their approach to karate and thus the art as it was originally practiced involved a lot of grappling. This can be seen clearly in the kata once properly examined.

2 - The Practical Approach

To be clear, my purpose here is not to denigrate point fighting or any other sport competition format. On the contrary, I believe that sport practice has great value in one's training, but I also believe it has limitations. We should use sport competition for what it's good for; the development of specific techniques, combative mentality, athleticism, personal achievement,

etc. What we shouldn't do is assume that proficiency in a specific sport format will automatically translate into proficiency in other more realistic combative contexts.

We need to have a portion of our training that addresses the way that you are likely to be assaulted in the event of a criminal attack. We should drill responses to common attacks (like haymaker punches), practice fighting for escape from multiple attackers, realistically address the best way to survive a knife attack, etc. We should resist the urge that many martial artists have, in our arrogance, to assume that an 'untrained' attack is inherently inferior to our own methods and therefore not worthy of our consideration. There is no amount of training that makes violence non-dangerous and, out of pride for our own methods and experience, we ignore the realities for criminal assault at our own peril. We need to be realistic in our approach and carefully consider what methods are truly most effective when our training matters most.

3 - Why Kata?

A common criticism of kata, once the bunkai is hammered out, is the idea that the applications themselves are fine - so why continue to practice the solo movements? What value does this traditional training method really hold?

I concede that the solo kata is not of prime importance. If one had to choose between the solo kata and the applications of the kata movements that need to be drilled with a training partner it is evident to me that the partner work is more important. Another of the biggest misconceptions in the karate world today is the idea that the ability to perform solo kata movements is a good indicator of one's combative ability. An inaccurate assessment, I believe this to be the reason why modern practitioners are often unimpressed when looking at what footage we have of the old masters. In real traditional karate, it is not the way that your kata looks that matters as much as how well you can apply your kata in combat.

"Once a kata has been learned, it must be practiced repeatedly until it can be used in an emergency, for knowledge of just the sequence of a kata in karate is useless."

~ Gichin Funakoshi

Kata has stood the test of time for a reason. I, like many karate practitioners, often train alone. When I do not have a partner to work with, what kind of training can I do to develop my combative ability? This is the kind of situation where solo kata becomes an especially useful tool. When the movements are informed by practical application, I can visualize the stimuli that the kata was designed to address and refine the technique through repetition of the movements. I have my kata with me anywhere I go; when I lack a training partner or the equipment I am accustomed to, it is a preferable alternative to not training at all.

Additionally, it is my view that kata came about as a way of recording information and it is useful to think of it like a text. When teaching the complex combative methods found in the kata it is beneficial for a student to be able to refer back to the solo movements as a sort of source book.

It provides a basic structure for which there is infinite variation, which is why you can spar with it. If the template itself is done away with, I think it is inevitable that we will lose some of the information that was passed down to us from previous generations. I don't want to be the link in the chain that breaks karate's connection to its past.

NAIHANCHI ANALYSIS

In the following pages I will use my favorite kata, Naihanchi, to illustrate how karate can be applied to close range clinch fighting. It is intended to serve as a good guide for how kata can be used to expand a practitioners skill set and promote a more well rounded practice. I have modified the kata, like many practitioners before me, to better fit into the totality of my practice. However, I think it is clear that the core techniques and principles of the kata are consistent with the versions found in various styles of karate.

Opening Movements:



The 'fence' ready position: Hands are up, open, and facing outward. They act as a barrier between me and the attacker, ready both to preemptively strike and to block and cover to defend. I have my right foot back slightly farther than my left, loading the hip so that I can put power into a right handed strike in the event that I choose to attack preemptively. It is important that I not stagger my stance too much as that will signal to my attacker that I am preparing to fight. For the same reason, I am not holding my hands in fists because, if possible, I would like to verbally deescalate the situation and remove myself from danger.	Cover and crash: In the event that deescalation fails and the opportunity for a preemptive strike is missed, I am forced to respond to the aggressors attack. As the punch is thrown I cover my head with both arms and step forward to crash into the attackers body. Together, these two methods will prevent my being overwhelmed by the initial attack as I transition into clinching range.	Pressing attacker's head down: Once I have moved into clinching range, I place both of my hands on the back of the attackers head and press down. This will break the attackers posture and, at least momentarily, make it difficult for them to punch with any kind of power.	Knee strike to the head: Having broken the attackers posture, I am now in a prime position to deliver a knee strike. In the event that my opponent has started to correct their posture, I can alternatively maintain control of their head and knee strike to the body or groin.
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Application:



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